

Preservation of the Trails and Settings in Wyoming

As I look to the future, I can not be optimistic about the prospects for the historic trails in Wyoming. We have struggled for the past twenty years to protect key segments of the trails from oil and gas development with some success. We are better about mitigating adverse impacts, but the bottom line is always the same: loss of trail and setting. Fortunately, the oil and gas activities are limited to certain areas and as a result some other areas remain relatively pristine.

In the future I see impacts over a much wider area. The threat is wind turbines (and possibly solar energy) and their associated infrastructure such as transmission lines. Many areas along the trails have been identified as having high potential for wind energy including the Sweetwater Valley, Dempsey Ridge and the Bear River Divide. Wind energy poses a special dilemma since it does provide “clean” energy and does address the green house gas issue which many relate to global warming. Challenging wind turbines is not a popular position these days.

With gas development we can seek to limit adverse effects to the trails by locating facilities away from the trails and using terrain to hide the wellheads and condensate tanks. Neither is very large. This does not work for wind turbines. By their nature they are big, dynamic and need to be on ridges. Also, they must be serviced by highly visible transmission lines. The lines from one wind farm can extend across the state and beyond. It is nearly impossible to have the “emigrant experience” while standing in the midst of wind turbines and power lines, even if they are in the distance.

It is imperative that we speak against the introduction of wind turbines and their infrastructure in areas with high quality trails and settings. This includes the Sweetwater Valley, South Pass and almost all of the Sublette and Lander Cutoffs. This voice must come from the citizens of Wyoming, although I will continue to speak out also. The governor, legislature, state historic preservation office and federal land managers should be contacted. It should be clear that we are not against the turbines per se, but they need to be placed in areas with low impact to natural and cultural resources.

I recently had the pleasure of interacting with students who are helping with OCTA’s “In Pursuit of a Dream” video. They had visited the area of Prospect Hill, southwest of Casper. They learned that the ridges along the trail in this area are soon to sprout wind turbines (they said next year). They asked what could be done to stop this project and I reluctantly replied, “not much.” Their disappointment was palpable. It is far too late in the process to impact this project. In any case, if it is on private land, there is little that can be done. But we can act on projects that are only in the starting block.

By and large it is up to the people of Wyoming to see that wind energy is developed in a thoughtful and responsible manner. The way things are going now, it looks like many areas will take on the appearance of the ridges west of Laramie and near Fort Bridger. Is that what you want? The scenic and cultural assets of Wyoming are at risk. Please speak out.

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